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April 3, 1987, Friday, Final Edition

SECTION: STYLE; PAGE B1

LENGTH: 4102 words

HEADLINE: Cry, The Embattled Smoker;
Fume and Gloom As Activists Invade Tobacco Road

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BODY:

You glide into that reception like you're docking the QE2. Pause a moment to peruse the murmuring throng. Your hand slips to the breast pocket . . . but wait. Can it be? Nobody's smoking? Oh, but there's . . . No, hell, it's a candy dish. You notice a couple of heads swiveling anxiously. Nobody wants to be first. You reach breastward again, but it's no good. You're a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen. This is nothing to be ashamed of. And yet you can't bring yourself to light that cigarette.

And pretty soon there you are in your best suit, skulking between the fire exit and a dumpster full of fish parts, having your sullen smoke and wondering when the fun went out of it. Wondering if you're really seeing the last gasp for the habit that's had America by the throat for 500 years -- ever since a puzzled Chris Columbus, on Nov. 6, 1492, took note in his journal of "women and men, with a firebrand in the hand, and herbs to drink the smoke thereof, as they are accustomed."

And so we were for centuries, what with four out of five doctors concurring and not a cough in a carload. Even the cancer reports -- scary, sure, but what the heck, it wouldn't be you and besides, wasn't it a sort of victimless crime?

But then came the mid-'70s, the liberation movement boom, and people you'd never heard of seemed to have rights you'd never imagined. "Back as early as '79," says a former three-pack-a-day man, "I'd begun to feel myself to be part of a tiny, embattled minority. Indeed, what with gay rights and women's lib in the mainstream, smokers had become the last social group which it was acceptable to despise."

Overnight, it seemed, the nation developed an epidemic palsy of subnasal hand-wagging; smoker-baiting became a nasty cocktail party amusement; gust-engulfed restaurant patrons, coughing ostentatiously, pounced with incendiary relish on hapless tobacconites five tables away. Monstrously ironic "Thank You for Not Smoking" signs became ubiquitous as Kliban kitties. Puffers retreated into a war zone mentality, their social lives the first casualties.

"Smoking!" growls a 32-year-old Alexandria woman, an executive at a national association and a hearty smoker. "It's the first thing men notice. I could look like Cybill Shepherd or a German shepherd -- it doesn't matter at all!"

"I kind of view myself as an easygoing person. But I still get ticked off when I go into somebody's house and don't see ashtrays. So you ask, and they make a big production of searching all over the place, rattling the cabinets."

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And finally they hand you the lid to some old jar, and say, 'Here -- I guess you can use this.' "

Not that she's even safe at home. "I was having a dinner party one night, eight, 10 people, and I light up a cigarette. This young woman next to me, somebody's date, she says, 'Excuse me, but smoke bothers me.'

"I said, 'Well, excuse me, but this is my own house!' Can you believe it?"

In the Noose of Regulation

But in the past three months, the climate of opinion has grown even more hazardous to smokers' mental health -- starting with Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's December pronouncement about the dangers of secondhand or "sidestream" smoke on nonsmokers.

Scarcely had the first wheeze of shock subsided when Chicago-based USG Acoustical Products told its 2,000 employes that where there's smoke, you're fired: All workers would have to quit smoking (at the office and at home) and would be given pulmonary-function tests to ensure compliance. Then in February new restrictive regulations went into effect for 890,000 federal workers in 6,800 buildings owned or leased nationwide by the General Services Administration. A few days later, talk show host Larry King -- who smoked slightly more than Gary, Ind. -- had a heart attack at 53.

Then on March 9, Cambridge, Mass., joined a growing list of cities (prominently including Beverly Hills, Calif., and Aspen, Colo.) that have banned smoking in most public places. Last Tuesday, the Montgomery County Council, like other area jurisdictions, approved a bill restricting smoking to designated areas in large restaurants.

And mass consciousness is due to ratchet up another notch on May 7, when New York State's new regulations go into effect, severely restricting smoking in public places and requiring employers to provide a smoke-free environment for workers requesting it.

(Actually, even the most draconian of the new ordinances seem outright timid compared with 17th-century New England's. In 1646, the General Court of Massachusetts passed a law forbidding settlers to smoke unless they were on a journey of five miles or more from any town, which makes walking a mile for a Camel look positively pedestrian. And the following year, a Connecticut statute limited tobacco use to once a day in the smoker's home -- "and then not in company with any other.")

"It's the number one etiquette problem today," says Judith (Miss Manners) Martin, and no one knows that better than the television industry, which has filtered so much smoke from the airwaves that many barroom or nightclub scenes now look downright improbable (though fastidious watchers of the Johnny Carson show say they have seen errant cloudlets just after commercial breaks). And now TV has lost the last high-tar star in prime time: Don Johnson of "Miami Vice." NBC was deluged with complaints that he was Setting a Bad Example for Youth, and "we were very frustrated," says Ralph Daniels, NBC's vice president for broadcast standards. Johnson was an off-screen smoker, and "we just couldn't get him to quit. But eventually he agreed," and viewers will be seeing a smokeless Sonny soon.

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The New Zealots

Not surprisingly, enthusiasm is growing among antismoking forces, from the acronymic army -- CATS (Citizens Against Tobacco Smoke), ASH (Action on Smoking or Health), GASP (Group Against Smoking Pollution) and so forth -- to the associations for your heart, lungs and other imperiled giblets.

"It's no longer an 'if' question," says Robert Rosner of the Seattle-based Smoking Policy Institute, "it's a when question." With public attitudes shifting, says Ahron Leichtman, president of CATS, "we're not perceived anymore as these weirdo freaks."

Or particularly reticent. "I'd rather date a man with herpes than one who smokes," says a prominent local journalist. And Ben Nields, 32, a local antismoking activist, has even more stringent standards. He won't even date an ex-smoker for fear she might restart. In fact, "there've been a couple of people I've gone out with -- they never smoked themselves, but they had a parent who smoked. I got to thinking, I don't really want an in-law who smokes." The relationship was doomed. "So I told this one lady, 'When your mother dies, let me know.' That obviously broke it up."

And now across the country, the nation's remaining 55 million to 60 million smokers are finding themselves beset with a new arsenal of insults from mere irritables to outright humiliations. When Fidel Castro swore off his trademark stogies last year as an example to Cuban men, he predicted that "there are going to be many women who will fight with their husbands." He didn't know the half of it. The growing zeal of antifumatory partisans and the often desperate intransigence of smokers are now colliding everywhere, not sparing even those intimate venues traditionally exempt from larger social forces:

A 30-year-old Virginia woman with six brothers and sisters would love to look forward to seeing her family. But she's allergic to smoke and asthmatic to boot. And "two out of seven children are chain smokers." So when the siblings convene at their parents' home in Pennsylvania for Christmas or Thanksgiving, cigarettes "just spoil the vacation," she says. Including often violent arguments over the dinner table.

.. ."It starts toward the end. They'll light up and I'll be sitting there sneezing and blowing my nose, and somebody else will say, 'Do you have to light that up now?' And my sister will say, 'If you don't like it, why don't you go somewhere else?' And I'll say, 'That's not fair. I'd like to at least finish my dessert.' And my brother will say, 'Hey -- it's only once in a while that we're all home, so just lay off!'

"Pretty soon everybody's screaming at each other and my dad will say, 'Okay, let's hold it down, kids.' At Thanksgiving it was just horrible, in front of company and everything."

It's hard to get a policy ruling, since the father is a cigar smoker, the mother a "sneaky" cigarette smoker, she says. "Dad has put ceiling fans up everywhere, and we open the windows, even in the winter." They're a big, loving Catholic family, happy in every other regard. "But I just can't stand it anymore, the teary eyes and mascara running. And one of my sisters is pregnant and she's worried."

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If there is one institution in contemporary life wherein smoking is not simply accepted but virtually cherished, it is Alcoholics Anonymous. For those who have painfully squeezed the liquor from their lives, "you can't just kick away their last addictive crutch," says an AA veteran. So by immemorial tradition, meetings are conducted amid the squeaking of styrofoam cups and thick blue cloths of smoke. Yet one local group, which has kept the same core participants for eight years, finally broke up recently -- over smoking.

"The guy who was to lead the discussion that evening," says a longtime member, "had been contacted earlier by nonsmokers" who wanted the subject brought up. It was, to the angered muttering of many. As tempers rose and oxygen content dropped, votes were taken, compromises mulled, air filtration machines considered, outrage vented. "It got very unpleasant. Finally one guy couldn't stand it anymore. He yells, 'Goddam it, I came here to talk about drinking, not this.' He just sat there and fumed for the rest of the night. I haven't been back since."

When a Lovely Flame Dies

But then, more intimate bonds have been broken. For a 26-year-old suburban Maryland woman, smoking was the reason that, after 2 1/2 years, she recently left the man she once expected to marry.

"When I first started dating him," it hadn't mattered much, she says. "I was infatuated with his humor, his interests, his charisma. Still, I used to delude myself into thinking: Even if I leave this relationship, I want to be the girl who helped him to quit. I got all the brochures from the lung and heart associations, talked to people who had quit and asked how they'd done it. I tried that old business about 'Give 'em a kiss instead of a cigarette.' All without mentioning her concern.

But as months went by, "I passed this very nebulous border where you feel you have the right to say these things. But by then, it's too late. He just said, 'Well, it never bothered you before.' " She looked hard at his soft 36-year-old body slouched in the armchair and knew that it had. She'd always been keen on exercise and half serious about health foods. "I realized that he could only be at his best in his apartment in a smoke-filled room. And then I began to resent the fact that he didn't take his own health as seriously as I did. Yet I was going to marry the man?"

Soon she was noticing "his other bad habits -- the fried foods, the lack of sleep, too much coffee." Once-amusing quirks became exasperating faults. "We'd be watching TV and I'd want to go out for ice cream. He'd say, 'Nah, it's too late.' I couldn't get him out of that chair. But if he ran out of cigarettes, you can bet that we'd be down at High's no matter what time it was."

Finally "one day I realized that I had begun to be physically repulsed by the smell of him, his breath." Her sex drive took a U-turn, and his increasingly desperate entreaties went from irritating to pathetic. A few weeks later she was gone. "Smoking," she says, sighing, "really got to be the biggest thing between us."

But trying to quit can be "actually worse than just smoking," says a 33-year-old union official who's dating a would-be quitter. "We can't get anywhere. I refused to buy cigarettes for him out of principle. And he won't

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buy a carton because he's always trying to quit. So we get up early and we're trying to get somewhere in a hurry and, wait, we've got to stop at the 7-Eleven for one pack. It was driving me crazy. Finally I started buying him cartons in self-defense. Our whole lives are driven by this need."

Mixed-lung couplings of that kind, however, are growing more rare. Numerous area dating services report that they are often able to mate up tubbies, nerds, mutants and jerks before smokers. Claire McCarthy of Matchmakers International says that "there's a definite increase in the number of people asking for nonsmokers. In fact, somebody just called with a pretty nasty complaint because we'd matched her up with a guy who was in every other respect absolutely perfect."

Another service, Together, has eight offices in the Baltimore-Washington area. Sometimes, says franchise coowner Diane Megahan, smokers need a hard sell. "We'll usually call the nonsmoker and say, since it's such a great match, would they mind giving it a chance? After all, the smoker can always quit."

Or just pretend. Rosner of the Smoking Policy Institute recently found himself seated on an airplane next to "this really attractive young woman" who enjoyed smoking, but wouldn't sit in that section: "I can't breathe back there." It turned out to be only one of many locales in which she forbore. "Oh, the worst is the bars," she moaned. "There's all those people smoking and drinking and enjoying themselves. And I can't light up." Well, why not? Rosner asked. "Are you kidding? What happens if one of those guys saw that I was a smoker? I'd never get a date!"

"Even big CEOs," says Rosner, "can get uptight about it like anybody else. I talked to this one guy, he's worth like \$ 30 million. And he says to me, 'It's really weird. I'll go into a meeting at another firm, and suddenly I'm anxious, wondering if I can smoke. I look around to see if there's any ashtrays.' For the sake of his concentration, the executive said, "I'd rather know in advance that I couldn't smoke for three hours instead of wondering about it. Smokers right now need to know the rules."

Many antismoking activists are delighted to help. A young Washington woman and occasional smoker, arriving for a small dinner party at a private home in February, noticed something odd on the dining room table -- a plastic sign bearing the international "no smoking" logo. Nestled among the decorations, it looked about as appropriate as a UNICEF can.

But the rules were clear. A Portland, Ore., restaurant uses a subtler tactic, offering a 15 percent discount for nonsmoking tables. It makes the peer pressure fierce: If one diner lights up, everybody gets burned.

Which is how smokers may soon find themselves, if current trends in the workplace hold. Smoke containment is now so urgent an issue that it "has become a design criterion" for new offices, says Frank Hammerstrom, senior principal at the Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum architectural firm in New York. Some companies are installing filters and reorganizing their space to accommodate smokers. (As of last year, The Wall Street Journal reports, 36 percent of employers had smoking policies in effect, and another 21 percent were considering them.)

But that's a stopgap solution, as more and more outfits opt for open work spaces and modular "systems" furniture. "What I expect to see," Hammerstrom

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says, "is that in the open-plan areas they will simply eliminate smoking entirely. The snowball is now at the top of the hill."

And it's rolling toward federal employes, too. The GSA's new smoking restrictions were timed to coincide with a push to consolidate agency offices from numerous leased spaces into fewer central locales and open-design areas using less floor space. "With systems furniture," GSA administrator Terence Golden said last fall, "we can save 40 square feet per person on average." Which means, in an office with nine-foot ceilings, more than 350 cubic feet less air space per person.

So woe, nowadays, to the job applicant who is puffing something besides himself. In a recent national survey of 1,000 executives, 73 percent said that if an applicant smoked during an interview it reduced his chances of getting hired. "There's a clear trend toward people who definitely feel real strongly about" hiring nonsmokers, says a spokesman for Thomas, Whelan Associates, a Washington executive placement firm.

Within the past two years, says Chuck Cherel, president of Professional Search Personnel, "all of a sudden we're getting requests for nonsmokers. And we're getting applicants who say they will only accept a smoke-free environment."

That's the subject of a pack of bills before Congress. In the House, there is legislation proposed by James Scheuer (D-N.Y.) to restrict smoking to designated areas in all U.S. government buildings; by Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) to prohibit smoking on domestic commercial flights; and by Pete Stark (D-Calif.) to amend the IRS code to disallow tax deductions for advertising or promotion of tobacco products.

In the Senate, Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) has sponsored legislation to prohibit smoking in public conveyances and in the Senate wing of the Capitol. And a bill introduced by Bill Bradley (D-N.J.), John Chafee (R-R.I.) and Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) would dump the tax deduction, increase the cost of tobacco products at military bases and double the tax on cigarettes.

(According to a 1985 staff memo from the Office of Technology Assessment, the federal cost of treating smoking-related diseases "amount to about \$ 4.2 billion in 1985 or about 14 cents for each pack of cigarettes.")

The Federal Aviation Administration has yet to take action on smoking in the air, despite a study by the National Academy of Sciences, released last August, that found that separate seating sections do not protect nonsmokers from cigarette smoke. Now the Joint Council of Flight Attendant Unions is backing federal legislation to ban smoking on many flights.

"People have probably noticed that they're falling asleep more on airplanes," says Mary Ellen Miller, health and safety director for the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants, "and they figure they're just more tired or getting older. Actually, the air is putting them to sleep." Drained of normal oxygen content and saturated with carbon di- and monoxides, the recycled cabin air can get so bad, Miller says, "that pilots tell us if we're feeling extraordinarily tired, to come and let them know and they'll turn up the power packs" -- that is, the fresh-air intake system.

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Since the Arab oil embargo, it has become a common airline cost-cutting practice to restrict the amount of outside air pumped into the cabin. The intake system runs off the engines, and using it burns additional fuel. That costs money, and so airlines usually prefer to simply recirculate the existing atmosphere.

There are some precedents for an airborne smoke-out. Air Canada has been experimenting with a ban on flights of two hours or less. And Texas-based MuseAir, proclaiming itself the first "no smoking" airline, flew from 1981 to '85 before financial problems forced it to merge with Southwest Airlines. Leichtman of CATS, a national coalition of 42 antismoking groups, has set a target date of Thanksgiving for an airline ban. By then, he says, "the only thing smoked on the plane will be the turkey."

Many antismoking partisans, however, are not holding their breath, since the new chairman of the Senate aviation subcommittee is Wendell H. Ford (D) from the burley-rich state of Kentucky. But tobacco sales there are down; and a poll released in March by the Louisville Courier-Journal found that 72 percent of respondents favored nonsmoking sections in offices, restaurants and airplanes; and only 9 percent opposed restrictions.

The Right to Smoke

This despite the tobacco companies' considerable efforts to encourage smoker self-assertion -- redolent in its bluff futility of the last Ptolemaic sniping against the encroaching Copernican universe. As R.J. Reynolds puts it on the inside of its cartons: "If you have decided to smoke, you have the right to enjoy smoking without being harassed." RJR (which, at the tour desk of its Winston-Salem, N.C., plant, has a sign that reads: "Thank You for Smoking") calls this a "fact." The Tobacco Institute, the Washington-based trade association that represents tobacco manufacturers, is somewhat more ecumenical: "The smoker has a right to enjoy something that gives him pleasure, and the nonsmoker has a right to avoid being annoyed by cigarette smoke . . . neither group has 100 percent of the rights."

In fact, there are precious few "rights" to go around. In some circumstances, collective-bargaining agreements may contain provisions allowing smoking in the workplace; in many jurisdictions, while such agreements are in effect, an employer cannot unilaterally impose a smoking ban. But aside from that, the current state of the law apparently does not recognize a "right to smoke."

That came as a surprise to Stanley and Elka Diefenthal. They had booked first-class smoking seats from New Orleans to Philly on Eastern; but when they boarded, they were told that the smoking section was full and that if they were determined to puff, they'd have to do it with the rabble back in coach. The couple sued Eastern and the Civil Aeronautics Board (for exceeding its authority in regulating smoking) and demanded \$ 10,000 for their "serious embarrassment and humiliation." The suit was dismissed; the pair appealed. And in 1982 the case wound up in the Fifth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, which called the affair "a relatively trivial incident" and affirmed the lower court's dismissal.

It is no trivial issue, however, for the 60 million Americans who spend \$ 30 billion a year on tobacco products.

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In the past 10 years, smokers have declined from 37 percent of the adult population (42 percent of males and 32 percent of females in 1976) to 30 percent today. Per-capita annual consumption of cigarettes hit an all-time high in 1963 (4,345 units, about 12 a day) though the total number sold did not peak until 1981 at 634 billion. Since then, sales have dropped below 600 billion and per-capita intake is down to 3,378 (around nine a day, roughly the 1949 figure). In fiscal 1984, federal, state and local taxes on that had amounted to more than \$ 10 billion.

Though tobacco pervades every demographic niche, it is generally true that the more money and education you have, the less likely you are to smoke. (With one conspicuous exception: women who work outside the home, including a disproportionately large number of professional women.) Widows and the unmarried constitute the lowest percentage of users, separated or divorced persons the highest by a substantial margin. High school girls smoke more than boys, blacks more than whites -- not surprising, perhaps, given the amount of its \$ 2 billion yearly ad expenditure the industry aims at young women and minorities. (And raising the nightmare query: If a company refused to hire smokers, would it constitute de facto discrimination?)

Various subgroups choose to smoke for a bewildering variety of reasons -- not all of them amenable to logic or social pressure. For example, in Utah only about 16 percent of the total adult populace smokes, "yet the rate of smoking for non-Mormon women," says Rosner of the Smoking Policy Institute, "is 40 percent." The reason? "It's the easiest way," Rosner believes, "to prove you're not a Mormon." Similarly, he has found that nurses have a surprisingly high smoking rate. "They're in the high 20s," says Rosner, "whereas doctors are at 6 to 10 percent." After asking around a bit, he found out why: "If they're off having a cigarette, they won't be disturbed. One nurse told me, 'I don't really like smoking, but it's the only way I can get people off my back!'"

Meanwhile, as the national clamor continues, even some of the hard core is softening. A local journalist recently jumped into a Windsor cab. The interior was festooned with the familiar "No Smoking" signs. Yet there was the driver smoking away like a Weber grill full of cheap pork chops. The signs, it turned out, were for the passengers only. "In the winter time," the sheepish cabbie explained between lung-loads, "the windows are closed, and four or five of 'em get in here and they all start puffin' at once. I just can't stand it."

GRAPHIC: ILLUSTRATION, STAYSKAL-THE TAMPA TRIBUNE; ILLUSTRATION, JOE TEODORESCU FOR TWP

TYPE: FEATURE

SUBJECT: SMOKING AND HEALTH; EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS (WORKPLACE); SEXUAL RELATIONS; TOBACCO INDUSTRY

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